

CONVENTION

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Abraham Lincoln's Political Career through 1860

Decatur Convention

Excerpts from newspapers and other sources

From the files of the
Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection

REMEMBERED OF LINCOLN

BY JOSEPH MEDILL, EDITOR OF
THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE.

**How Lincoln Invaded Mr. Medill's
Sanctum in 1855—He Protested
Himself "Something of a Seward
Whig"—A Great Speech of this
Martyr President's That Was
Never Reported—One of the Keenest
and Shrewdest of Politicians
—A Master Hand at Circulars**

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Chicago, April 12.—About noon of a spring day in 1855 the office of the Chicago Tribune was invaded by a singular apparition. The editorial establishment consisted at that time of a single long room on the third floor of the Evans block, a building called after Dr. Evans, who also gave his name to the now famous town of Evanston. It stood on a part of the ground now covered by the skyscraping Ashland block and from the editorial windows "the foreck looked out upon the quagmire called Clark street, wherein as a frequent diversions from their labors, they might see a hayrack wagon sunk hub deep in the mud, over which the driver, facetious in misfortune, had set the legend:

NO BOTTOM HERE.

The "force" was grouped about a single long table in the center of the room, the editor-in-chief at one end, the proofreaders at the other and in the interval the reporters, minor editors and "specials"—there were not many, nor were the lines dividing their ranks and duties very sharply drawn.

To them entered, on the day in question, a very tall, angular man of dark complexion and hollow cheeks, somewhat stooped at the shoulders. He stood half a head above six feet in height. His legs were absurdly long and thin, and he had enormous feet and hands. His head, also abnormal in its length, was heavily thatched with a shock of rumpled dark hair, and under the shaggy eyebrows was a pair of deep-set eyes, whose keen but merry twinkle went a long way toward redeeming the absurd figure from utter comicality. The visitor carried in one hand a carpet bag about three feet long and so deep that, tall as he was, it barely cleared the floor. It seemed to be packed with all its owner's portable belongings. He glanced along the table to the editor's chair, and in a drawing, high-keyed voice asked the young man who occupied that throne.

"Can you tell me when I can see Dr. Ray?"

Dr. Ray was then the senior editor of the Tribune. He was not in.

"Well," continued the visitor, still addressing the young man at the top of the table, "may I ask if you are the new editor from Cleveland—McDill, or Medill, or something?"

"I am McDill, the new editor," the young man answered.

"Well, I guess you'll do just as well."

The new editor asked, and with a degree of formalism quite foreign to the Chicagoan of forty years ago for the manner of the visitor had been decidedly brusque: "Please tell me whom I have the pleasure of addressing?"

"Well" (this drawing expetive for the third time), "Well, down on the Sangamon river they used to call me 'Abraham Lincoln.' Now they generally call me 'Old Abe,' though I ain't so very old either."

"Old Abe" was already a name to conjure with in Illinois. The "new editor from Ohio" directly gave to his visitor a seat and engaged him in conversation of lively interest to both. But first there was business to be done.

"I'm in a hurry," the hero of the Sangamon river began, "but I came up to subscribe for your paper. I can't get it regularly down our way, so I borrow it from a

neighbor. But sometimes he lends it before I get around. Now I want to pay for six months ahead," and he pulled from the cavernous pockets of his "jeans" a pocket-book, untied the strap, and counted out four \$1 bills. Mr. Medill took the money (there was no boastful pride in those days to separate the great editor from the counting room), and wrote a receipt on a sheet of "copy" paper. This document Mr. Lincoln thrust into his pocket, remarking as he did so: "I like your paper; I didn't like it before you boys took hold of it; it was too much of a Know-Nothing sheet."

Then he plunged into conversation. But the young editor observed that his new acquaintance had a sharper faculty for asking questions than for answering them. Enter his careless exterior he maintained an impenetrable reserve. He inquired of Mr. Medill about all the leading politicians in Ohio, whom he seemed to know with a degree of accuracy surprising in those early days when, with few railroads and fewer telegraphs, Ohio was further from Illinois than California is now. How were Giddings and Chase, Carter and Wade?

Before he arose to go he said: "Well, I guess I'm something of a Seward Whig myself."

This meeting was the beginning of an acquaintance which lasted, with increasing intimacy, until Lincoln's death, and involved not a few incidents in his life hitherto unrecorded.

At the first Republican state convention held in Illinois, at Bloomington, in May, 1856, Mr. Medill assisted in the double capacity of delegate and reporter for the Tribune. The convention is chiefly noteworthy as the occasion on which Mr. Lincoln delivered the most eloquent speech of his life. Such at least is the testimony of the few living persons who heard it. Mr. Medill's story of the conversation and the speech have an especial interest in view of his professional relations with the speaker.

"After a full ticket had been nominated," he says, "there was a season of speech-making, and all the talk was of 'Bleeding Kansas.' Among the speakers was Owen Lovejoy. After he had finished a ~~or~~ went up for Lincoln, and presently, at the back of the church, in which the convention was held, up rose my gaunt, angular friend, looking exactly as he did when I first saw him in the Tribune office a year before. He came forward with a giraffe-like swing the never walked straight like other men) and stood in front of the pulpit. But after he had spoken a few sentences the delegates shouted to him to get up into the pulpit. He did so, and there finished his Demosthenian speech.

"It is one of the regrets of my life that this speech of Lincoln's was not preserved. It was easily his most radical, and it was the first of a series of events which made him president. I have often tried to reproduce it from memory. Once, at the request of the late Thorndyke Rice, of the

North American Review, I attempted to reduce my recollections to paper for that magazine; but the more I tried the more McDill and the less Lincolnian the speech became. So I had to give it up.

"I will tell you how the speech came to be lost. Lincoln (after he had mounted the pulpit) began something like this:

"Gentlemen of the Convention: I am not here as a delegate; I have no credentials and might as well be called an interloper. But you have given me a 'call' to speak, and, like a Methodist minister, I have responded. A few of us got together in my office at Springfield yesterday and elected ourselves as sympathetic visitors to this convention. We have no Republican party organized in Springfield at this time, but we have a few Republicans. I foresee trouble ahead that will grow out of this uncalled for repeal of the Missouri compromise that will tax the wisest and most patriotic men to keep American citizens from imbuing their hands in their brothers' blood."

"Then, for I can remember his exact words no further, he drew a picture of slavery and its baneful effects on this country if extended, and delivered the most terrible invective upon that institution, it seemed to me, that ever fell from the lips of man. I remember he said at the close something like this: 'Come what will you may count on Abraham Lincoln to stay with you to the bitter end on the side of free soil and the rights of free men.'"

"But I do not pretend to remember more. When the speech was finished I found myself standing at the top of the reporters' table, shouting and yelling like one possessed. Every one else present was wrought up to the same condition.

"At length I bethought me of my notes for the Tribune. I had none. In my excitement I had quite forgotten my duties as reporter. I turned to my fellow reporters. They were in the same fix and for the same reason. The speech was not reported and never can be reproduced from memory.

"But I learned one lesson from this misadventure. There were but two good news-

paper shorthand reporters in Illinois at that time. I went back to Chicago and chartered one of them for the Tribune when he might be needed. He was 'Rob' Hitt, since better known as the Hon. Robert R. Hitt, congressman from Illinois and long chairman of the committee on foreign affairs."

During the senatorial campaign of 1858, which engaged Mr. Lincoln's activity before he became an avowed candidate for the presidency, Mr. Medill met him often on political business. When he went to Springfield he dined several times at the Lincoln house and partook of the fare prepared by Mrs. Lincoln's hands. Even at this early time Mr. Medill formed the opinion, which his subsequent experience only confirmed, that Mr. Lincoln was of all the "practical politicians" of his day the keenest and the shrewdest. In organizing a party, securing the doubtful votes by presenting the issues rightly before them, and in all the details of "practical" work of a campaign Lincoln had no equal among Republicans in Illinois in those days. To send quinine to a farmer sick with the prevailing illness of the frontier, "fever 'n ague," was said to be one of his favorite devices. He had a master hand at circulars. He sometimes addressed them "to my friends," signed "A. Lincoln." At other times he wrote the addresses and circulars which were signed by the central committee.

It was in this campaign of 1858 that Mr. Lincoln delivered in the representative hall at Springfield that famous speech—famous for its radicalism—calling for the ultimate extinction of slavery as a thing in itself "radically wrong." Such sentiments were far in advance of the public sentiments of that time, even in the radical Northern states, and Mr. Lincoln was considered by not a few of his friends to have committed political harp. But by this speech, but knowing Mr. Lincoln as he did, Mr. Medill felt assured that the speech was no dithyrambic outburst of sentiment, that a deliberate motive lay behind it. It was not, however, until years thereafter, when Mr. Lincoln was president, that opportunity offered to confirm this surmise. For, with all his bonhomie and apparent openness, Mr. Lincoln was a most secretive man, even to his friends. But visiting at the White House in the course of the civil war, Mr. Medill found the president in a mood which seemed favorable to confidence, and squarely put to him the question: "Why did you deliver that very radical speech at the state house in the spring of 1858?"

With what seemed like affected surprise Mr. Lincoln exclaimed, "Oh! Then, lapsing into reserve, he put the counter question: 'What do you think was the reason?'"

Getting no answer he saw fit to lay aside his reserve and made this characteristic explanation:

"Well, after you fellows had got me into that position of standard bearer to take a stand that reflected the real heartfelt thoughts of our party on that terrible slavery question. It was ground we could afford to be beaten on in the preliminary battle with slavery. So I concluded to say something that would make everybody think."

And he did. "He then," says Mr. Medill, "made the issue on which he was afterwards elected. He went deeper into the heart of the great issue than even Seward ventured."

Those who remember the Springfield speech may also recall how much use Douglas made of it in the campaign of 1858 to alarm the conservatives and warn them against the "reckless demagogue," his opponent, who would emancipate the slaves. And in his reply to these attacks Mr. Lincoln illustrated another phase of his character by his artful defense of the speech until, as repeated and explained by himself on the stump, it appeared to the most cautious voter as the inevitable outcome of the question from the very nature of things.

—Newton MacMillan.

Lincoln and the Party in Illinois

He Was Far from Being an Inactive Figure
from 1848 to 1854

PRACTICALLY all the biographies of Lincoln leave the impression that he lost interest in politics after retiring from his single term in Congress until the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska bill aroused him. A careful study in the light of documents shows this an error, says the "Times Observer" in the St. Louis Times. 3. 4. 1822

In his campaign for Taylor in New England in 1848—Herndon gives much space to the character of this campaign, but he did not seem to realize Lincoln's purposes—Lincoln seemed to be trying out his powers as a stump speaker before audiences as far different from the pioneers of Illinois as one could imagine. He met with great success, his audiences frequently following him to other towns to hear more.

It must be remembered that he opposed the Free Soilers of Massachusetts in that campaign. His speeches were straight Whig and anti-Democratic arguments. In Congress, in a humorous speech, he had exalted Taylor and ridiculed the military pretensions of Gen. Cass. His New England speeches followed the same lines.

It was during this canvass that he had a long talk with William H. Seward and as a result of this he decided that the "irrepressible conflict" was coming sooner than he supposed. Mr. Lincoln tried for two presidential appointments after that election. He was offered the governorship of the Territory of Oregon, but his wife vetoed his acceptance. Herndon says that from then on Lincoln mingled less with the people, read less and thought more. Herndon was apparently ignorant of any political activities of his partner until the Kansas-Nebraska bill came up for general discussion.

Directed Young Republicans

Thanks to the indefatigable labors of Walter B. Stevens, veteran Washington correspondent and secretary of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition of St. Louis, we know that Lincoln was very active in directing the formation of the Republican party in Illinois. By common consent, Ira Haworth was called the father of the Republican party in Illinois, but Haworth, who afterwards moved to Kansas, in many long and interesting interviews with Stevens, said that not a step was taken by him and his young associates in organizing the new party without consultation with Mr. Lincoln.

In particular was the question of the attitude toward immigrants discussed with their mentor. In the East Republican leaders showed a tendency toward "Know Nothingism." The Whigs in Illinois had been anti-alien, while the Jacksonian Democrats relied much on the immigrant vote. The Legislature in Illinois once recast the Supreme Court of the state in order to in-

sure aliens being allowed to participate in the coming presidential election. Many Germans had come into the Mississippi Valley following the unsuccessful revolution of 1848. They were opposed to slavery. The new party, in Mr. Lincoln's opinion, could not "start on a proscriptive principle." Consequently, instead of an anti-alien platform there was one welcoming the new citizens to the new party.

Wanted Douglas to Win

From what is known of Lincoln's political sagacity, manifested on many occasions, there is strong ground for believing that he was looking to 1860 in the fight with Douglas far more than was surmised from the remark he dropped before asking the famous question at Freeport. From the viewpoint of Lincoln's admirers, interested in the immediate result of the senatorial race, this was a daring question, for Douglas answered it in a manner satisfactory to the believers in squatter sovereignty in Illinois. But Douglas was hanged in effigy in Virginia as soon as his arguments as to harassing local legislation reached the Old Dominion. Lincoln foresaw this. Perhaps Douglas did also, but Douglas simply had to be re-elected or he would have been a statesman without a job and could not possibly have been his party's standard bearer in 1860. The only chance for Lincoln becoming presidential candidate lay in the candidacy of Douglas. Lincoln could afford to

lose the senatorship in "gunning for bigger game."

The Freeport question was not as "brave" as many have conceived. Lincoln's real bravery was shown in his famous declaration about a house divided against itself. This was a happy and sagacious alteration of the unfortunately phrased "irrepressible conflict" of Seward.

Lincoln and Missouri

We are indebted to Stevens' research for an enlightening article on Lincoln's activities in Missouri, published by the Missouri State Historical Society a few years ago. Stevens shows that Lincoln and Frank B. Blair on the 7th of April, 1857, had a conference in Springfield, as a result of which the old St. Louis Democrat altered its policy so as to break up Democratic solidarity in Missouri. B. Gratz Brown was the editor who conducted this adroit campaign. John Hay, who was a law student in Lincoln's office, contributed regularly to the Democrat from that time on. John G. Nicolay, a country newspaperman, who was a political lieutenant of Lincoln, was both traveling correspondent and subscription solicitor for the Democrat in Illinois. There is internal and external evidence that Lincoln himself wrote editorial articles for the Democrat.

This campaign split Missouri into many factions, the question of union and that of slavery being the points of difference, with va-

rious angles. This was the time when the gradual emancipationists showed much strength.

Although the Missouri Republicans endorsed Edward Bates, later attorney general in Lincoln's cabinet, for the presidential nomination, Mr. Bates and all his associates were really for Lincoln and were vigorous in the activities of all the border state delegates and visitors at the convention in urging the nomination of a man who understood them and who could rally the union spirit to support of the party and the nation.

Missouri cast 165,000 votes in the campaign in 1860, of which only 17,023 went to Lincoln electors, yet the Douglas electors nosed ahead of the Constitution Union electors by fewer than 600 votes. The Democratic organization was shattered in Missouri.

Saved State to Union

Stevens shows in his article the intimate touch Lincoln had with Missouri affairs which enabled the Union forces to save the arsenal in St. Louis and to establish a provisional government when Governor Jackson went with the Confederacy.

It is regrettable that the recent biographies of Lincoln have begun to specialize on the recollection of old men—largely valueless, because they were "suggested" by a correspondent who gathered these reminiscences a few years ago for the Eastern press—and have neglected a wealth of material showing the far-seeing planning of Lincoln during the period when Herndon supposed he was engaging in melancholic meditations.

"Uncle Joe" Cannon Recalls Nomination of "Young" Lincoln

BY ROBERT S. THORNBURGH
International News Service
Staff Correspondent

Washington, Feb. 12—Abraham Lincoln's famous series of debates with Stephen A. Douglas, and his appearance at the Illinois State convention which put him forward for the presidential nomination in 1860, were intimately described today—Lincoln's birthday—by former speaker Joseph G. Cannon, the only living member of Congress who was personally acquainted with the martyred president.

Cannon, nearly 87 years old, and with a record of 46 years in Congress back of him, was a rising young lawyer and politician in the ominous days of 1858, when "the little giant" and "the rail-splitter" were contesting for the United States senate.

Heard Two Debates

"I heard two of the debates between Lincoln and Douglas," "Uncle Joe" told International News Service. "One at Sullivan and the other at Charleston. I think I'd have journeyed over the state to hear the others if walking had not been so poor."

"It was a wonderful contest between giants. Douglas was remarkably strong and resourceful. Lincoln failed to reach the senate but the whole country was aflame and at the end of those great debates he had a national, if not a worldwide reputation."

"When 1860 came, Illinois concluded to make him her candidate for the nomination for president."

"We met at Decatur, Ill. I was a delegate to that convention—drove there in a farm wagon 60 miles across the prairie."

The Nomination.

"The convention was held in a structure erected between two brick buildings, with posts cut from the forest and covered with

bows cut from the forest—the ends open.

"Just about the time the convention was organized a voice came:

"Make way for Dick Oglesby and John Hanks!"

"They came through bearing two walnut rails. These two rails were set up and there was a legend on a strip of cloth: 'These rails were made by John Hanks and Abraham Lincoln!'"

"The cry came for Lincoln—great, tall, gaunt man that he was, they literally picked him up and passed him over the heads of the crowd."

Lincoln's Modesty.

"Somebody had asked him if it was proper for him to be there, as he was a candidate for the presidency."

"A queer expression came over Lincoln's face and he said:

"The truth is, I am most too much of a candidate to be here, but hardly enough to stay away."

"The seward people were swept off their feet in that convention and a delegation unanimously chosen consisting of personal and political friends of Lincoln, who went to Chicago, to that convention held two or three weeks later in the wigwam."

Behaved Well

"You know the result. Then came the campaign. Lincoln behaved very well. He did not make speeches. He answered a few letters."

"I saw him once after the election at Springfield, Illinois. He was on his way, in a day coach and without companions, to go to Charleston to meet for the last time the old stepmother who called him 'My Boy Abe'."

Rockford, Ill.—Fire at Monroe Center, Ill., 12 miles south of here, destroyed a business block with a loss estimated at \$100,000.

ILL., TUESDAY, JUNE 30, 1936

Ill. St. Journal

LINCOLN NAMED RAIL CANDIDATE AT STATE MEET

gamon bottom. I don't know whether we made those rails or not; fact is, I don't think they are a credit to the maker—but I know this, I made rails then and I think I could make better ones than those now."

Demonstration At Decatur Planned To Influence Chicago Convention.

Supporters of Abraham Lincoln for the presidency determined that the Decatur state convention on May 9, 1860, should be an overwhelming demonstration for him, in order that the national convention might follow this lead.

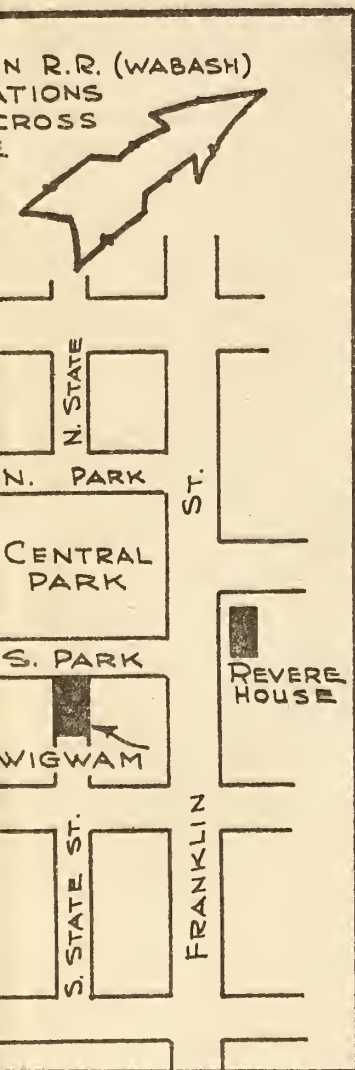
Accordingly Richard Oglesby, with the help of John Hanks, devised a neat stratagem. While the convention was in session, Oglesby announced an old Democrat wished to make a contribution to the convention. He walked Hanks, bearing on his shoulder two rails with a banner attached:

"Abraham Lincoln, the rail candidate for president in 1860. Two rails from a lot of 3,000 made in 1830 by John Hanks and Abe Lincoln, whose father was the first pioneer of Macon county."

The convention went wild. Lincoln, called upon to speak, said of the rails: "The truth is, John Hanks and I did make rails in the San-

Republicans in 1856 in Decatur

LINCOLN'S DAY



in 1830 they traded at the Renshaw store; in front of it, in June or July of 1830, Lincoln made his first political speech in Illinois. The Wigwam was used on May 9 and 10, 1860, for the state Republican convention which indorsed Lincoln for President; it was then that he was given the campaign name of "The Railsplitter."

Church, Rockford; William B. Ogden, Chicago; Gavion D. A. Parks, Joliet; Thomas J. Pickett, Peoria; Edward A. Dudley, Quincy; William H. Herndon, Springfield; Richard J. Oglesby, Decatur; Joseph Gillespie, Edwardsville; David L. Phillips, Jonesboro; and from the state at large, Gustave Koerner, Belleville, and Ira O. Wilkinson, Rock Island.

Herndon, as Lincoln's law partner, an abolitionist Whig and a member of the 1854 Republican party effort, is not likely to have been on the state central committee without Lincoln's consent. A month after the editors' convention Herndon declared "this appointment is deemed by me the highest honor of my life." But when he wrote his "Life of Lincoln" he passed over the convention. Gillespie was a "Know-Nothing" Whig, and Koerner a German Democrat.

Oglesby left soon after the editors' meeting for a tour of Europe and Colonel Pugh was appointed in his place. Oglesby was later to become known as one of the original Lincoln men and staged two Lincoln demonstrations in the state Republican convention in Decatur in May, 1860, when Lincoln was indorsed for the presidency. Ogden resigned due to absence from the state, and Dr. John Evans was named to his place. Koerner, then lieutenant governor, declined to serve due to his long affiliation with the Democratic party and the fact that he was not certain the time had arrived for a new party.

FINAL ACTION of the formal session of the editors' meeting was to recommend that a convention of anti-Nebraska forces of the state be called to meet in Bloomington on May 29, 1856. This was the convention in which the Republican party in Illinois was formally launched under the name of "anti-Nebraska" forces.

With the business of the editors' convention over, there followed a dinner in the dining room of the Cassell House. It was here that Abraham Lincoln made his first public appearance with the anti-Nebraska forces and aligned himself with a new party, a party that in four years was to send him to the White House.

Lincoln Speaks

Secretary Usrey in the Feb. 28, 1856, issue of his Decatur State Chronicle reported the editors' dinner as follows:

At ½ past 3 p.m. the Editorial Fraternity, along with a goodly number of citizens of this city, and invited guests, repaired to the spacious dining room of the Cassell House, where a sum-

stantial, and etc., the meeting was called to order by the President, who delivered a neat and appropriate address welcoming the Editorial Fraternity to the hospitality of the citizens. His remarks were well received.

Mr. Blaisdell, in behalf of the press, responded with the sentiment: "The citizens of Decatur—we fully appreciate their hospitality."

Mr. Oglesby was then loudly called for. Mr. O. made a number of witty remarks and concluded by toasting Mr. Abraham Lincoln as the warm and consistent friend of Illinois, and our next candidate for the U. S. Senate. (Prolonged applause.)

MR. LINCOLN AROSE and said the latter part of that sentiment I am in favor of. (Laughter) Mr. L. said, that he was very much in the position of the man who was attacked by a robber, demanding his money, when he answered, "my dear fellow, I have no money, but if you will go with me to the light, I will give you my note," and, resumed Mr. L., if you will let me off, I will give you my note. (Laughter and loud cries of go on.) Mr. Lincoln then proceeded to address the assemblage for some half hour, in his usual masterly manner, frequently interrupted by the cheers of his hearers.

Mr. Baker of the State Journal, was then called for, and responded, that owing to the bountiful dinner, he was too full for utterance, but would give a toast, "Hon. Dick Oglesby, the next Secretary of State." (Applause.)

Mr. Ray addressed the audience upon the Kansas difficulty at some length, and was listened to with marked attention.

To give all the toasts and speeches, uttered on the occasion, would exceed our space, and we bring this article to a close, by the remarks, that we were somewhat surprised, that our Nebraska friends, both in the city and attending from abroad, did not participate in the dinner, as such was the intention of the Committee.

WHILE USREY reported that Oglesby toasted Lincoln as "our next candidate for the U. S. Senate," Selby who presided at the dinner, states in a letter written June 7, 1912 (published in the Decatur Herald, June 9, 1912), that Oglesby suggested Mr. Lincoln's name as a candidate for governor.

of the editors present had inaugurated to make him the anti-Nebraska candidate for Governor at the ensuing election, Mr. Lincoln spoke (in substance) as follows: "I wish to say... it was nothing more than an attempt to resurrect the dead body of the old Whig party. I would secure the vote of that party and no more, and our defeat will follow as a matter of course. But I can suggest a name that will secure not only the old Whig vote, but enough Anti-Nebraska Democrats to give us the victory. That man is Colonel William H. Bissell."

Shaw of Dixon related still another incident of the Lincoln speech at that dinner. Lincoln said, according to Shaw, that he felt like the ugly man riding through a wood who met a woman, also on horseback, who stopped and said:

"Well, for land sake, you are the homeliest man I ever saw."

"Yes, madam, but I can't help it," he replied.

"No, I suppose not," she observed, "but you might stay at home."

WHAT ELSE MR. LINCOLN said in that half-hour speech which Usrey did not have space for in his paper, may never be known. One wonders whether Lincoln's suggestion of Bissell as a good candidate for governor explains the line in Selby's letter to Yates: "He read to me a letter from the gentleman we were speaking of last evening for Govr.," and whether the convention fulfilled the expectation mentioned in another line in the letter: "I think we all agree as to what is to be done at the Convention."

The state central committee called the Bloomington convention. The editors' convention had created the machinery to start a new political party in Illinois. Lincoln was at the launching. He became almost immediately its leader.



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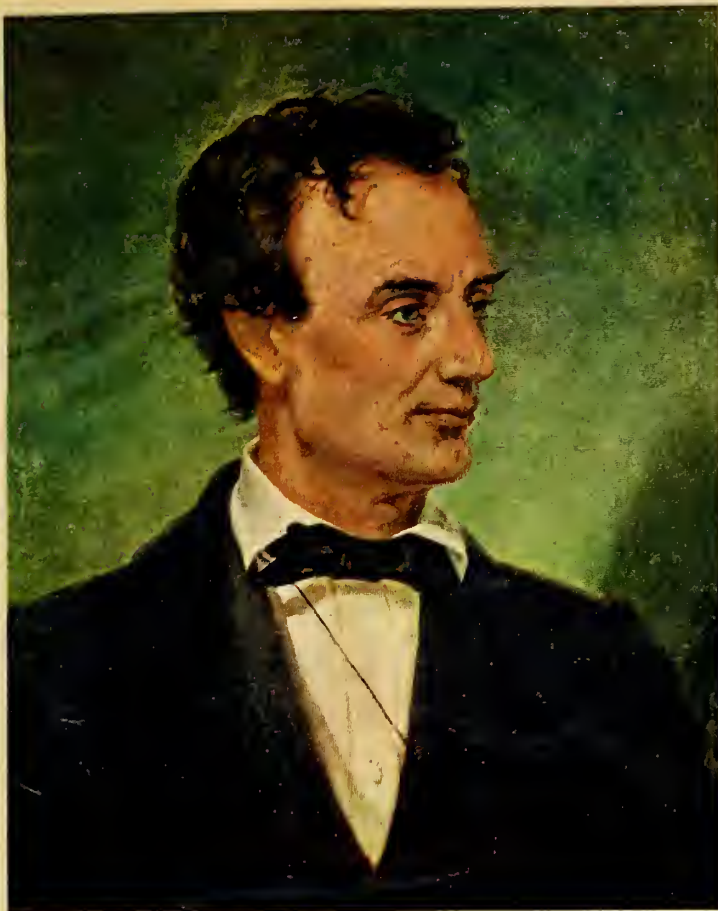
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ABE LINCOLN— RAIL CANDIDATE

How a New Party Created a Symbol
and Elected a President

By James T. Hickey

Curator of the Lincoln Collection, Illinois State Historical Library

WHEN RICHARD J. OGLESBY, a young Decatur lawyer, conceived the idea of bringing two rails into the Illinois Republican state convention at Decatur in May, 1860, he created a party symbol which brought forth an outburst of pioneer enthusiasm that far surpassed his immediate purpose of swaying the convention into endorsing Abraham Lincoln. Decatur had been selected as the site of the state convention by the Republican State Central committee at a meeting in Springfield on Feb. 8, 1860. At another meeting of party leaders in Springfield in the office of Secretary of State Ozias M. Hatch, Lincoln had authorized the use of his name as a candidate for the Presidential nomination, if the committee thought it proper.

To the new party's leaders—David Davis, Jesse W. Fell, John M. Palmer, and Oglesby—it was essential that Lincoln be endorsed by the state convention if he was to have a chance at the national one in Chicago.

While most of Decatur was busy preparing accommodations for the 700 delegates and several thousand visitors and erecting a temporary convention hall or "wigwam" on South Park street, Oglesby found time to work out his rail plan.

Altho Oglesby hoped to keep the idea of the rails a secret, the Decatur correspondent of the Illinois State Journal (Springfield) revealed the news in advance: "Among the sights which will greet your eyes will be a lot of rails, mauled out of burr oak and walnut, 30 years ago by old Abe Lincoln and John Hanks, of this county. They are still sound and firm, like the man that made them. Shall we not elect the rail mauler President? His rails, like his political record, are straight, sound, and out of good timber."

On the first day of the gathering Oglesby had the convention invite Lincoln to take a seat on the speakers' stand. Just as the delegates prepared to take the first formal ballot for a candidate for governor, Oglesby arose and announced that there was an old Democrat outside who had something he wished to present to the convention. Joseph Gillespie, who knew Oglesby's plan, shouted, "What is it? What is it?" as others shouted, "Receive it! Receive it!" A vote was taken, and the chairman ordered that the "old Democrat" be admitted.

John Hanks and Isaac Jennings then entered, each carrying a fence rail; a banner stretched between the rails bore this inscription:

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

The Rail Candidate

Two rails from a lot of 3,000 made in 1830 by Thos. Hanks and Abe Lincoln, whose father was the first pioneer of Macon county.

A tremendous burst of applause went up from all parts of the Wigwam. Lincoln was called on to speak. He stated that some 30 years before, on coming to the state, he had stopped with his mother's family for one season in what is now Macon county. There, he said, he had built a cabin, split rails, and cultivated a small farm down on the Sangamon river, some six or eight miles from Decatur. These rails, he was informed, were taken from that fence; but whether they were or not, he went on, he had mauled many and many better ones since he had grown to manhood.

The next day after a battle with Thomas J. Turner of Freeport, who was leading the Presidential nomina-

tion fight for William H. Seward of New York, the convention passed the following resolution:

"Resolved, that Abraham Lincoln is the first choice of Illinois for the Presidency, and that our delegates be entrusted to use all honorable means for his nomination by the Chicago convention, and to cast their votes as a unit for him."

Oglesby and his rails had served their purpose, whether they came from the cabin site or not. Charles Hanks, who had lived all the time within two and a half miles of the Lincoln cabin, claimed, in a letter published soon after the convention, that the Lincoln fence had burned five years after it was built, but John Hanks maintained the rails were genuine.

In later life Oglesby said that John Hanks had sold the two rails he brought into the convention—one went to a man from Kentucky for five dollars. The demand for the rails caught on quickly, and Hanks brought a wagon load into Oglesby's barn, where he sold them for a dollar apiece.

The nearby Democratic paper, the Express of Sullivan, Ill., published an article on May 17 headed "Lincoln Rails." The writer said that the rails were cut in very small pieces and sold, and that he had it on good authority that said rails were made about three years before by a man named Reedy. He ended with this comment, "Whew! How our Republican friends love to be swindled!"

Newspapers thruout the country reported the rail incident at the Decatur convention, tacking on to Lincoln's name "Rail Mauler," "Rail Splitter," "Rail Candidate," and so forth. Young Robert Lincoln became known as the "Prince of Rails" after the visit of the Prince of Wales to Springfield in September, 1860.

The rails were very much in evidence at the national convention in Chicago. The office of the Republican Chicago Press and Tribune was decorated with rails. Rails purchased at Decatur for one dollar now sold in Chicago for ten.

The rail became Lincoln's badge. Rail Splitter clubs sprang up all over the country, and everyone had to have at least one "genuine original Lincoln rail." Elmer Ellsworth's Zouave company perfected a zigzag drill as an imitation of a rail fence; the drill was quickly picked up by Republican parades.

Campaign illustrations showed Lincoln splitting rails. Badges depicting Lincoln splitting rails were worn by all good Republicans. Others carried canes made from "genuine" Lincoln rails. Three towns—Kingston, N. Y.; Cincinnati, O.; and Chicago—had campaign newspapers called The Rail Splitter.

The Democratic newspapers made fun of the Republicans for using such a "silly" idea to promote their candidate. Some Democratic cartoons showed Lincoln being ridden out of the election on a rail. One paper declared the country needed a "hairsplitter" not a "rail splitter."

Nevertheless, Lincoln "The Rail Splitter" swept on to victory, and the rail became as much a part of the Lincoln tradition as his beard.

LINCOLN LORE

Bulletin of the Lincoln National Life Foundation - - - - Dr. Louis A. Warren, Editor
Published each week by The Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, Fort Wayne, Indiana

Number 1037

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

February 21, 1949

PROLOGUE TO FAME Steps to the Wigwam No. 8

Lincoln returned home in March 1860 from his triumphant tour of the east to find the Republicans in his own state embroiled in bitter controversies and political rivalries. Two of the leading Republicans of the state, John Wentworth, and Norman Judd, both of Chicago, had been calling each other names which had resulted in a libel suit. Wentworth wanted to be mayor of Chicago and Judd wanted to be governor of Illinois, and both were doing all in their power to prevent each other from attaining their respective objectives.

Two more of Lincoln's friends, Leonard Swett and Richard Yates, were also aspiring to the governorship and of course along with Judd were seeking Lincoln's endorsement. Another ally Lincoln had counted on, Ebenezer Peck, was reported to be supporting the Democratic candidate for mayor of Chicago against Wentworth, and the powerful Chicago Tribune was apparently withholding its support of the Republican nominees for mayor. This condition of things caused David Davis to write Lincoln three days after he had departed for New York:

"If Judd, Peck, and the rest of them succeed in beating Wentworth the prospects of carrying Illinois would not be worth a gnat. . . . Your political prospects it seems to me depend on your course in Chicago." It might also be added that Lincoln was advised that Judd really favored Lyman Trumbull as the presidential candidate from Illinois; that southern Illinois seemed to be for Bates; and northern Illinois for Seward.

Out of these discordant elements Lincoln was supposed to mold a formidable political unit within a period of ten weeks, which would be sufficiently united and strong enough to place his name in nomination at Chicago, for the Presidency of the United States. It seemed like a herculean task inasmuch as he had no semblance of any organized movement under way, unless one might imply the Illinois State Central Committee was for him. Even his very closest political advisor, Judge Davis, believed at the time Lincoln returned from New York that either Bates or Seward would be the nominee.

Lincoln was not only without a local organization at this time, but his friends in other states had not been encouraged to form Lincoln clubs. From Lafayette, Indiana, H. Johnson wrote to Lincoln on February 24: "So delegate have been the demonstrations of your friends, I should be at loss to know to whom to address myself." Letters from Ohio also imply that Lincoln's individual supporters there had no idea whom Lincoln's political sponsors were in Illinois.

Lincoln's reluctance to come out publicly and press his bid against other candidates, who for years had been groomed for the place, may have been encouraged by John Wentworth who wrote to Lincoln on February 6:

"As to yourself I give you the advice I gave Douglas prior to the convention that nominated Pierce at Cincinnati. Look out for prominence. When it is ascertained that no one of the prominent candidates can be nominated then ought to be your time. This plan would have nominated Douglas. It should nominate you to one of the offices."

The Lincoln Papers which throw new light on pre-convention alignments also reveal other little known episodes in the political situation in late April, 1860. Wentworth had already been elected as the Republican mayor of Chicago, much to Lincoln's advantage. Davis paid him a visit and immediately wrote to Lincoln a remarkable letter which reveals that Long John had made a great impression on Davis, who opened his letter to Lincoln with this statement, "I am more and more

convinced of the wonderful power of John Wentworth." Davis then continued:

"But sub rosa, Wentworth is for you decidedly and emphatically. He is for Seward in his paper for purposes that are satisfactory to me. The Germans in Chicago love Seward, Judd is against Seward. Wentworth wants to beat Judd. He must do it through the Dutch. Hence for Seward. . . . There are 6000 Dutch and Scandinavian voters in Chicago. They cannot and must not be lost."

On April 24, the day after Davis wrote to Lincoln, Lyman Trumbull, the Illinois senator who was holding office largely through the magnanimity of Lincoln, wrote a long letter to Lincoln on "my impressions in regard to the Presidency." His first observation was not very encouraging when he stated, "In regard to yourself I am inclined to believe that between you and Governor Seward if the contest should assume that shape, that he would most likely succeed." Trumbull's second supposition was that Seward if nominated could not be elected, so with Lincoln and Seward both eliminated, Trumbull puts forth an argument in favor of Judge McLean and asks Lincoln, "would our state go for him in the convention after you?" Trumbull then hastens to assure Lincoln, "I wish to be distinctly understood as first and foremost for you." Trumbull's final appeal in favor of McLean states, "My reason for suggesting a rally upon him against Seward is the belief that it would be better to take him and possible victory than Seward and possible defeat." Trumbull further advises Lincoln that "the success of such a cause as we are engaged in should not be first imperiled by personal consideration," so if Lincoln's own personal sacrifice had not put Trumbull in the Senate.

Now apparently Trumbull wants Lincoln to again climb upon an altar when this time he may be sacrificed for McLean. A further stab at the sacrificial Lincoln came in the very last sentence in the letter when Trumbull states, "I do not believe Douglas will be elected," hence the implication, no need to bring on the conqueror of Douglas as a candidate. There is some indication that Trumbull entertained the idea that his own candidacy might be enhanced with another Lincoln sacrifice.

A factor of major consideration to Lincoln was the moving forward of the national convention from June 13 to May 16. At first this move must have discouraged Lincoln as it cut down the time left necessary for organization nearly a third, yet if he did not wish to gain "prominence" it was a good thing. Of more importance however, was the fact that it placed the National Republican Convention at Chicago just one week after the Illinois State Convention at Decatur.

The details of the Decatur convention are so well known to every student of Lincoln, especially the introduction by Richard Oglesby of John Hancock with the Lincoln Balm, that further discussion of it does not seem necessary. One might conclude that it was not until the phenomenal demonstration at Decatur took place that there was any evidence among the Illinois Republicans that they were keyed for a one week's concerted drive almost unparalleled in American politics. It was based however on the reasonably good ground which Lincoln had prepared for just such a scene. Wentworth had been not only elected mayor of Chicago but also stopped Judd. Judd while defeated for the nomination for governor at Decatur, had won out over Wentworth for a place among the four delegates at large for the Chicago Convention. So finally the full Republican strength was back of Lincoln.

While the favorite son nomination of Lincoln was anticipated at Decatur, no one expected that such a tremendous surge of enthusiasm would be generated, that unabated it would flow over into the Chicago convention and engulf the delegates of the larger and more important assembly. Decatur furnished for Abraham Lincoln The Prologue to Fame.

"Golden Era"

"It was a wonderful contest between giants. Douglas was remarkably strong and resourceful. Lincoln failed to reach the senate but the whole country was aflame and at the end of those great debates he had a national, if not a world-wide reputation.

"When 1860 came Illinois concluded to make him her candidate for the nomination for President.

PICTURES CONVENTION

"We met at Decatur, Ill. I was a delegate to that state convention—drove there in a farm wagon 60 miles across the prairie.

"That convention was held in a structure erected between two brick buildings, with posts cut from the forest, stringers cut from the forest and covered with boughs cut from the forest—the ends open.

"Just about the time the convention was organized a voice called out:

" 'Make way for Dick Oglesby and John Hanks!'

"They came through, bearing two walnut rails. These rails were made by John Hanks and Abraham Lincoln.

CRY FOR "RAILSPLITTER"

"The cry came for Lincoln—great, tall, gaunt man that he was, they literally picked him up and passed him over the heads of the crowd.

"Somebody had asked him if it was proper for him to be there, as he was a candidate for the presidency.

"A queer expression came over Lincoln's face and he said:

" 'The truth is I am most too much of a candidate to be here, but hardly enough to stay away.'

LINCOLNITES WIN

"The Seward people were swept off their feet in that state convention and a delegation unanimously chosen, consisting of personal and political friends of Lincoln, went to Chicago to the national convention held two or three weeks later in the Wigwam.

"You know the result. Then came the campaign. Lincoln behaved very well. He did not make speeches. He answered a few letters.

"I saw him once after the election at Springfield, Ill. He was on his way in a day coach and without companions to go to Charleston to meet for the last time the old step-mother who called him 'My boy, Abe.'"

